Anglo-Saxon conversion: the coming of the cross (at the point of a sword)

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Although the Anglo-Saxons’ adoption of Christianity has often been labelled as peaceful, in reality many were swayed by the threat of aggression. Marc Morris investigates the violence that greased the wheels of conversion

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The story of how the Anglo-Saxons came to be converted to Christianity begins in Rome, at some point towards the end of the sixth century. A monk named Gregory (who in 590 became Pope Gregory I) was walking through the market when he noticed some unusual-looking boys being sold as slaves. Struck by their beauty, he asked where they were from and was told they were Angles, prompting a famous pun. “Good”, he reportedly replied. “They have the face of *angels*, and such men should be the fellow heirs of angels in heaven.”

Such at least was the tale told by the Venerable Bede, writing around 150 years after these events, who indicated he didn’t set very much store in its credibility. But, like all good legends, it was grounded in reality. Six years into his pontificate, Gregory dispatched a mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons, headed by a monk named Augustine. Arriving in 597, Augustine was greeted by the king of Kent, Æthelberht, who was extremely hospitable. The king soon converted, along with his people, and in the decades that followed, the rulers and peoples of the various other kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England followed suit. By 686, well within a century of Augustine’s arrival, all the former pagan polities had become Christian.

As you might expect, the process of bringing heathens to the light of heaven is presented to us in our earliest sources as essentially a benign and beneficial one. The heroes of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* are holy men, such as St Augustine or the Northumbrian St Cuthbert, and the good kings like Æthelberht who listened attentively and facilitated Christianity's spread. Æthelberht, said Bede, "compelled no one to accept Christianity", and this point was seized upon by later historians as clear evidence that the whole conversion process was voluntary. "We nowhere read of any of those persecutions at the point of sword," said the Victorian scholar Edward Freeman, "which disgraced the proselytising zeal of the Frankish and Scandinavian apostles of the faith."

But this was nonsense. The Anglo-Saxons had been pagan since time immemorial, long before they had started settling in eastern Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. The fact that four of the days of the week in modern English are named after their heathen gods (Tiw, Woden, Thunor and Frig) indicates that their ancient ancestral beliefs were deeply embedded and therefore cannot have been lightly eradicated. Freeman's faith in English exceptionalism apparently blinded him to the occasions where our sources point to exactly the kind of violence he insisted had only happened in other countries, not in dear old England.

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Chased off by pagans

St Augustine's mission soon spread from Kent to the neighbouring kingdoms of Essex and East Anglia. And it also reached the far north when King Æthelberht's daughter, Æthelburh, was married to King Eadwine of Northumbria, bringing with her a priest, Paulinus, who became the first bishop of York. But the Roman mission ran into difficulties when the first generation of convert kings died. The bishops of London and Rochester were chased from their dioceses by new pagan rulers, and both the queen of Northumbria and the bishop of York were forced to flee when King Eadwine was killed in battle.

In the north, however, Christianity was swiftly re-established by missionaries who hailed from a different direction. Ireland had embraced the new faith in the fifth and sixth centuries, and the new king of Northumbria, Oswald, having grown up in Irish exile, had been converted by Irish monks on the island of Iona. Soon after his accession, Oswald established some of these monks on the island of Lindisfarne, close to his royal seat at Bamburgh. In the generation that followed, missionaries

from Lindisfarne not only re-evangelised Northumbria, but they also resumed the conversion of Essex and eventually won over the rulers of the powerful midland kingdom of Mercia.

The two churches, Roman and Irish, were quite different in style. While contemplative Irish monks liked to base themselves on off-shore islands, their Roman counterparts preferred their seats to be in ancient cities, abandoned since the days of the Roman empire. Ascetic Irish missionaries walked from place to place, whereas Romans ostentatiously rode horses. There were also differences on points of doctrine. Disagreement on how to calculate the date of Easter led to a stormy debate at Whitby in 664, during which the Northumbrian king Oswiu (the brother of Oswald) switched sides, forcing the monks of Lindisfarne to align themselves with Rome.

Seducing kings

But when it came to converting people, the methods of the two churches were essentially the same. The first and most important target for any missionary effort was the king. Here, perhaps, the Roman church had the edge, bringing with them the papacy's association with ancient imperial power and bearing precious gifts. In an effort to induce King Eadwine of Northumbria to convert, the pope sent him a gold-embroidered robe, along with a silver mirror and a gilded ivory comb for his queen.

[SVG Image]

Some pagan kings took a spiritual test drive, agreeing to convert if God granted them victory over their enemies

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However, Christians of either camp could offer other inducements to aspirational pagan rulers: the power of literacy, enabling them to record laws and grants of land, and the promise of military success against their rivals. (We hear of more than one king taking what amounted to a spiritual test drive, agreeing to convert if God granted them victory over their enemies.) Most of all, the new religion offered

the irresistible guarantee of everlasting life in paradise – an idea that must have had great appeal in a world where the death of rulers by plague, assassination or dismemberment in battle was a frequent occurrence.

Christianity was equally attractive to other members of the elite. Royal and aristocratic women, for example, embraced the new faith because it offered them an opportunity for self-determination, as the heads of monastic communities. Whitby, the monastery where the famous synod of 664 took place, had been founded a few years earlier by Hild, a great niece of King Eadwine of Northumbria, known to posterity as St Hilda. In her capacity as abbess of Whitby, she ruled over both its male and female residents, earning the respect of a whole generation of holy men and women. All who knew her, says Bede, “used to call her ‘Mother’ because of her outstanding devotion and grace”.

More stick than carrot

But what of the non-elite folk? How were they induced to convert? The monasteries founded by kings and aristocrats were not closed-up affairs, and some of their residents took it upon themselves to tour the countryside, preaching and baptising. But many weeks, and maybe months, would elapse between these periodic visits, during which ordinary people had no spiritual guidance. They might erect a wooden cross at which to congregate to hear itinerant preachers, and in time it might be replaced with something more impressive, like the carved stone crosses that survive from the seventh and eighth centuries. But a system of parishes, with a priest resident in every settlement, lay hundreds of years in the future.

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A storm blew up and swept the Northumbrian monks out to sea. Their fellow monks wept, but the peasants who were watching jeered

[SVG Image]

The gulf between the experience of the elite and that of the common folk is well illustrated by a story told by Bede. He describes how some Northumbrian monks were using rafts to move wood along the river Tyne, when a storm blew up and

swept them out to sea. Their fellow monks wept, Bede tells us, but the peasants who were watching stood and jeered. Let the monks drown, the crowd declared, “for they have robbed people of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows.”

This incident suggests that, when it came to the conversion of ordinary people, there was probably rather more stick than carrot. King Eorcenberht of Kent, who ruled from 640 to 664, was praised by Bede for being the first Anglo-Saxon king to order the destruction of pagan shrines across his whole kingdom and for forcing people to fast during Lent. A generation later, Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury, newly arrived from Rome but originally from Cilicia (now Turkey), banned all manner of heathen customs: people burning grain to purify a house in which a corpse was resting, or mothers who placed their daughters in ovens to cure them of a fever.

Such proscriptions, and the persistence of pagan worship in spite of them, invite us to consider the nature of the earliest conversions. In a letter from 598, Gregory I boasted that Augustine had baptised more than 10,000 people in Kent on the first Christmas after his arrival. Similarly, Bede relates that Paulinus, the first bishop of York, spent five weeks at the royal estate of Yeavering in Northumbria, baptising every day from dawn till dusk. In both cases, Bede claims these mass conversions occurred because people flocked to embrace the true faith.

But did they really flock, or were they herded? Having assured us that *it was said* Æthelberht of Kent compelled no one to accept Christianity, Bede adds that the king “nevertheless showed greater affection for believers, since they were his fellow citizens in the kingdom of heaven”. With warrior kings like Æthelberht, it was always wise to remain on their affectionate side.

The belief that the rapid conversion of vast numbers of people can only have been achieved through royal compulsion is borne out by the biography of St Wilfrid, who was at various times bishop of Northumbria and the de facto bishop of Mercia and Sussex. During his time in Sussex, boasts his biographer, Wilfrid baptised thousands of pagans in a single day, “some freely, and some at the king’s command”.

Other episodes in Wilfrid’s career demonstrate that both he content to see Christianity spread through more overt forms of violence. For instance, on the occasion of the dedication of his splendid new church at Ripon, the bishop delivered a speech before King Ecgberht of Northumbria and all his courtiers, in

which he listed all the lands that had been donated by the king and his predecessors.

Ecgberht had won these lands as a result of his recent war of conquest against the British rulers to his west, and Wilfrid had been given the estates deserted by the British clergy, “fleeing from our own hostile sword”.

As this implies, the British were not pagans but Christians, but they refused to celebrate Easter on the correct date, so war against them was felt to be justified. “Indeed,” affirmed Wilfrid’s biographer, “God would be pleased with the good kings for the gift of so much land to our bishop.”

Merciless slaughter

When it came to the conversion of the Isle of Wight, however, even Wilfrid’s biographer sought to minimise the bishop’s involvement, so shocking was the violence that unfolded. During Wilfrid’s time in Sussex, the kingdom was invaded by a pagan warlord called Cædwalla, who killed the sitting South Saxon king and then went on to depose the king of Wessex. By the mid-680s he was poised to conquer the Isle of Wight, which at the time was an independent kingdom. Cædwalla, says Bede, “endeavoured to wipe out all the natives with merciless slaughter, and to replace them with inhabitants from his own kingdom”. This genocidal scheme, carried out by a heathen king, was nevertheless supported by Wilfrid, for the inhabitants of Wight had not yet been converted, and the bishop saw conquest as a way of bringing them to the light. In return for lending his spiritual support, Wilfrid was given a quarter of the island as reward – a massive endowment of land that meant Christianity was established on the strongest of footings.

The king of Wight, Arwald, seems to have perished during the fighting, but his two younger brothers managed to escape to the mainland, where they hoped to remain hidden. Soon, though, they were betrayed and handed over to Cædwalla, who ordered their execution. The only consolation Bede was able to draw was that both boys were permitted to receive baptism before they were killed, “and so made sure of their entry into the eternal kingdom”.

> Bishop Wilfrid supported this genocidal scheme, as he saw conquest as a way of bringing heathens to the light

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As Bede noted, the Isle of Wight was the last of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to convert. By the late 680s, according to his reckoning, Britain had no more heathen rulers. Half a century later, when Bede was writing his famous *Ecclesiastical History*, Christianity had advanced a great deal further, and he was able to conclude by listing all the many bishops who were ministering to the various kingdoms and celebrate the continued increase in the number of monks and nuns.

It was thanks to the assiduousness of these individuals that thousands of others must have eventually been brought to a fuller understanding of the new faith. Men and women such as Augustine, Cuthbert and Hild, through their tireless efforts and exemplary devotion, had gently and patiently won hearts and minds in a way that led future generations to remember them as saints. Scholars like Bede, or Hadrian, the abbot of Canter-bury who came from north Africa, ensured the history of the conversion was not forgotten and that the learned languages of Latin and Greek were taught as widely as possible.

But we deceive ourselves, as Edward Freeman did, if we pretend that the rapid advance of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons, particularly in its early days, was accomplished *only* by these peaceful methods and did not involve “persecutions at the point of [the] sword”. For many, their initial conversion was brought about through compulsion, violence and bloodshed.

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